

The Rev. Joy Hoffman was a neighboring small church pastor when we lived in Beaver County. She was—hands down—one of the very best preachers that I have ever heard. Why? Because she could preach that which is unexplainable. She could take the wonder and the mystery of Christ and deliver a simple message about it to her congregation—something that is a lot harder than you might think.

Peter preached two of the most powerful sermons recorded in the New Testament. The first was on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. The outcome of that Acts chapter 2 sermon, according to the Scripture, was that “*about three thousand were added to their number that day.*” Not bad, wouldn’t you say? The largest audience in the history of Billy Graham’s ministry assembled at Yoido Plaza in Seoul, South Korea in 1973. There were 1.1 million people that came to hear Billy Graham. Perhaps far more than 3,000 came to Christ on that day. The other remarkable sermon Peter preached is recorded in Acts 10 when he visits the house of Cornelius. That sermon worked to bridge the historic divide between Jew and Gentile, which had another truly amazing outcome.

The story of the Transfiguration, the commonly given name for the Gospel story from Matthew 17, is fairly well-known but shrouded in mystery. Long before they preached any sermons, Peter, James, and John, went with Jesus up a high mountain. Once they arrive, they are suddenly met by Moses—who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, and Elijah—who called down fire from heaven in a contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel! To add to this, a sudden bright cloud covers them, and they hear the voice of God. This leaves the disciples face down on the ground—*terrified!* Why certainly! But Jesus comes to them and says, “*Get up. Don’t be afraid.*” When they look up, they see only him.

If we put ourselves in the disciples’ shoes, we realize that they’ve had quite a night. There has been a lot they don’t understand, and it all culminated with hearing the voice of God speaking from a bright cloud. You can almost see

their brains trying to make sense of what is happening. In the presence of what is clearly inexplicable, Peter says, “*Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.*” What Peter more honestly might have said is this: “What in the world are we doing here? I’m not sure we should be here at all, Jesus. What can we do?” So, he suggests something that might be useful by trying to set up three shelters or tents. [Would that be *too* intense? Sorry!] Basically, this situation does not need an explanation. It’s simply something to be experienced.

We like explanations for what happens in our lives. Explanations give us a sense of control, a sense that we are directing the events of our days. When confronted with things that have no explanation, we usually get scared! We invent explanations or we try to fit new experiences into familiar categories, so we don’t have to live with the mystery. But Jesus frees us from having to explain and understand everything we experience. He indicates we don’t always have to explain life, but sometimes we ought to simply live it!

To the Corinthians Paul wrote: “*Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet*” (15:51-52). Did you hear that? The mystery of Christ is about changing. One dimension of the human predicament can be noticed in our reaction to the word *change*.

In my experience not very many people love the idea of *change*. Obviously, the sick want to be well, and the addicted want to be free, and the imaginative want to be stimulated. I suppose there are many of us who want small changes in our lives—to be taller, slimmer, smarter, more physically fit. But not many of us respond well to change in organizations around us, like our government, our schools, or our church. Change happens slowly, reluctantly, most of the time.

When we see something wrong in ourselves, in our family, in our school, or in our church, we might be in favor of change. But when we are at peace and contented with all around us, change is disruptive. Let’s be honest; most of us fear change. So, we might hear “*we will all be changed in a moment, in the*

twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” in very different ways. Some of us might think, “Well, at least I’ve got until the last trumpet sounds before I have to change!”

The Greek word *musterion* is used 7 times in Paul’s letter to God’s holy people in Ephesus. The highest concentration of the word is in Ephesians chapter 3, where we read: **2** *Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the **mystery** made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the **mystery** of Christ... 6 This **mystery** is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the administration of this **mystery**, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.*

So, in light of Paul’s letter, I’m convinced that the point of today’s Scripture is to help us appreciate mystery, that is, things that are unexplainable, so we can change our petrifying paralyzing *fear* into confident courageous *faith*. When we stop trying to control every situation, we can let faith be our final and best answer whenever and wherever we are faced with the unexplainable. Do you see that this whole story is couched in unexplainable mystery? Listen again...

“Jesus...led them up a high mountain by themselves...There he was transfigured before them...His face shown like the sun...His clothes became as white as the light...Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah.”
“And...a bright cloud covered them and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’”

Well now. Do we all understand all of that? I don’t! This story goes beyond the miracles of Jesus; beyond the wise teachings and healings that Jesus’ disciples have already witnessed. These three fishermen were awestruck by what they saw and heard. They had no human explanation for this incredible event, so they expressed a very human emotion. *They were terrified!* This was beyond anything they ever knew or experienced. Did you catch Jesus’ intentional

command to them after coming down the mountain: “*Don’t tell anyone what you have seen...*” (17:9)? Truth be told, I find it impossible to imagine that Jesus’ three friends were not already left utterly speechless. How could anyone speak about being in the presence of Elijah and Moses, the Father and the Son, at one time, a moment filled with ethereal and celestial majesty and glory?

Is it possible for this story to change our fear of the unexplainable into trusting faith? The answer of course is “Yes,” but we’re not going to change involuntarily, without some kind of personal response to Jesus’ words, “*Don’t be afraid.*” What is the ultimate purpose of this unexplainable event? Well, my mind goes to the words of the Gospel in John chapter 20—John’s thesis statement that reveals why he even bothered to write his Gospel: “*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (John 20:31). These words were written, these stories of Jesus were told, so that you and I will be *changed from fearful to faithful* followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lutheran pastor Paul Lundborg has written: “There are moments in life when our self-satisfaction is shattered and we actually *want* to be changed. Hearing this story can perhaps draw us to that mountaintop so we long to be filled with awe and mystery in the presence of God. Wouldn’t we love to be outside of ourselves, beyond our worries and burdens, totally covered in God’s comforting, yet terrifying presence? I would. Something like that happened to Peter, James, and John, and even though we can’t say they were *never afraid again*, because we recall how they fled in fear when Jesus was arrested. Some newfound courage led them all to die a martyr’s death. Could that newfound faith have been born on top of this mountain with Jesus and Moses and Elijah?”

There’s a word in the church’s vocabulary that summarizes the process by which God does his work within us. That word is *formation*, and throughout the centuries, the church’s teachers and theologians have reflected on how God is forming us. Whenever we gather here, we listen repeatedly to stories from the Bible, we offer prayers in worship, and we sing hymns to the glory of God. The impact of those words chip away at the hard places of our hearts, round off the rough edges of our lives, and lead us in a definite direction. Slowly, ever so slowly, sometimes too slowly because we get impatient, we are being shaped

into the likeness of Christ, drawn toward the love of God, molded by the Spirit. We slip and fall and are picked up and returned to the path of our discipleship; and the process goes on.

If we are honest with ourselves, we may at times realize that we don't always *want* to be here in church. We don't appreciate every piece of music, every Scripture reading, every single prayer, or every last sermon. It's shocking! I know. But maybe we could say like Peter, "*It's good for us to be here...or at least I think it is.*" Sunday mornings may blur together over time, but they all work together to keep us nourished, strengthened, and alive in our faith.

You and I are being changed. We certainly don't have an explanation for everything, but God is still at work in us and through us. God isn't done with us yet. We are far from a finished product. Nevertheless, let us pray that we will be open to God's work, desire God's presence, and recognize the need for God's guidance.

Today's Scripture reminds us there are some incredible moments in our lives that are simply unexplainable. At times we can't even describe to another person exactly what has happened when it happens, but we can follow the One who knows our name and has called us to take up a cross and follow him down the mountainside to places of suffering, sacrifice, and celebration.

Jesus frees us from having to comprehend and explain everything that we will ever experience. Nonetheless, Jesus throws a bone to Peter, James, and John when they ask him about Elijah if we read beyond today's Scripture passage. In the end they understand that the Elijah who has already come is John the Baptist. I believe that Jesus is telling us that we don't always have to have an explanation for life. Sometimes it's best for us to simply live it.

Praise the name of Jesus, Savior, Redeemer, and Lord! Amen.